

engaging the community to support student success

SCHOOL SYSTEMS HAVE LONG RECOGNIZED THE NEED FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT AND PARTICIPATION, BUT NOW MANY DISTRICTS ARE RENEWING THEIR COMMITMENT TO STRENGTHEN THE TIES WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES.

More than ever, school districts realize they are dependent on community support to meet mandated state and national performance standards, develop innovative programs and secure financial resources.

To build lasting community support for schools that facilitates student achievement, school boards are developing communication strategies that routinely reach diverse community groups. The process of building such partnerships, called public engagement, is an ongoing, two-way communication between a school district and the community it serves (Resnick, 2000).

This Digest examines how public engagement can foster student achievement, how school boards and administrators can facilitate the public-engagement process, and how school leaders can solicit enduring support from key stakeholders.

HOW CAN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROMOTE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

In one report, superintendents and board presidents advised communities just convening public-engagement

by chris cunningham

efforts to focus their planning efforts on student achievement (Wright & Saks, 2000). Involving parents, teachers, members of the business community and others in the process of identifying academic goals and standards and measures of progress can be a powerful vehicle for improving student achievement and influencing the direction and success of school programs.

Parents who understand and support educational standards will help their children meet these expectations. When the community supports the standards, it is more likely to provide the resources to meet them. "Accountability is essential in maintaining public confidence, and accountability begins with shared understanding of desired results" (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000).

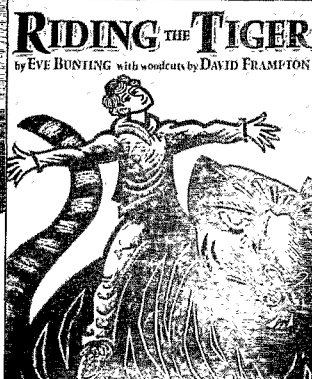
Public engagement also gives school systems and stakeholders the opportunity to learn about trends among youth and in the community that might influence academic outcomes. The entire community benefits from understanding social and health conditions that interfere with learning, such as teen pregnancy, inadequate nutrition and lack of health care. In other words, public engagement can enhance the community's overall quality of life (Resnick, 2000).

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS AND DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?

Student achievement—and community engagement that focuses on fostering achievement—is now recognized nationally as the primary agenda for boards of education. School boards are charged with the responsibility of creating conditions within their districts that will help students meet today's more rigorous knowledge and performance standards. This role represents a dramatic shift in responsibility for school boards, which previously held oversight roles and served as passive reviewers of others' work performance. Now boards are expected to share the responsibility for how well students and schools perform (Gemberling, Smith & Villani, 2000).

Although 78 percent of superintendents in a recent Public Agenda survey reported they have processes under way to encourage public engagement, only 41 percent say they actually solicit the input of the community prior to formulating policy. Only four percent of the superintendents viewed communication with the community as their most pressing concern. Superintendents "absolutely believe in the concept of public engagement... but when it comes to the execution as opposed to the intent, the reality is somewhat different," says Public Agenda president Deborah Wadsworth (Deily, 2001).

Parents notice this discrepancy between intent and action. More than half the parents in an Education Commission of the States survey said they believe

MARILYNNE
BLACK

> PICTURE BOOKS

ON SOCIAL ISSUES

HANK AND FERGUS. *Susin Nielsen-Fernlund.* Orca, \$16.95. 1-55143-245-5. Grades K-2. Hank, lonely and teased about his birthmark, learns that not everyone judges solely on physical appearances.

WAY HOME. *Libby Hathorn.* Anderson, 2002. \$10.99 (paperback). 1-84270-232-7. Grades 2-5. Gritty street talk and dark, stark and dramatic illustrations by Kate Greenaway medal-winning illustrator Gregory Rogers tell the story of a young boy who finds a stray kitten and takes it home—to his cardboard box.

THE RED TREE. *Shaun Tan.* Simply Read, 2003. \$16.95. 0-9688768-3-8. Grades 4-12. Surrealistic illustrations of dark leaves filling up her room and an imaginary landscape eloquently portray a young girl's feelings of depression.

RIDING THE TIGER. *Eve Bunting.* Clarion, 2001. \$16.00. 0-395-79731-4. Grades 2-4. This allegorical fantasy, illustrated in strong woodcuts, has young Danny succumbing to temptation only to learn that fear is not a substitute for respect and that sometimes choices have unforeseen results.

OLD TURTLE AND THE BROKEN TRUTH. *Douglas Wood.* Scholastic, 2003. \$17.95. 0-439-32109-3. Grades 3-7. Spare watercolor-and-ink illustrations augment this philosophical tale of the nature of truth and how it can differ for different people. Excellent choice for a discussion about tolerance.

schools in their community have gotten off on the wrong track, and fewer than four in 10 think local schools are headed in the right direction (Solomon & Ferguson, 1998).

If raising student achievement is a district goal, school boards and superintendents should begin by looking at whether their current processes actually summon the dispersed knowledge of the community. If processes are designed merely to endorse the status quo or influence a desired outcome, the goal of improving student achievement will probably fail. A school district should not simply view public engagement as one of its projects but as a way of doing business.

For example, a school system might realize that it needs public input to implement the district's goals for student achievement, such as improving state and district test scores, or raising graduation rates. Rather than hold a series of traditional forums such as school board meetings and public hearings on an as-needed basis, the district can initiate continuous methods of communication that sustain an ongoing connection with the public (Resnick, 2000).

Collaboration and participation are key elements in successful public-engagement efforts, what Anne Meek (1999) describes as

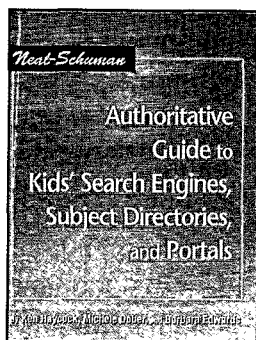
"strategies that go beyond providing public information or ensuring good public relations, to promoting substantive, participatory roles for citizens in governance matters." Such efforts should be considered "a purposeful management tool," says L. Joan Brown (2001), whose definition of community includes all town government units, businesses, charitable organizations and other groups interested in the economic and social well-being of the community.

WHAT IS THE PRINCIPAL'S
ROLE IN PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT?

Principals play a key role in promoting community partnerships. Facilitating ongoing involvement with families, with a clear focus on improving student achievement, is perhaps the most critical step schools can take to engage the community. Toward this end, the principal should let the staff know that family involvement is a high priority by providing them the time and resources and training on how to work with parents (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001).

Principals can promote teacher commit-

The Neal-Schuman Authoritative Guide to Kids' Search Engines, Subject Directories, and Portals



*By Ken Haycock, Michele Dober,
and Barbara Edwards*
Neal-Schuman, 2003.
1-55570-451-4. 175 pp. \$55
Part of the Neal-Schuman Netguide Series.

What you'll find inside!

- Evaluations and recommendations to the top search engines, subject directories and portals especially designed for kids.
- Top 20 recommended search engines and subject directories for kids (including *Ask Jeeves for Kids*, *Cyber Sleuth - Kids*, *Homework Planet*, *KidsClick!*, *Lycos Zone*, *Searchopolis* and *Yahooligans*) are covered in detail, the strengths and weaknesses broken down, and each is rated.
- Explains children's searching behaviors.
- Describes the kinds of logical thinking, critical evaluation and search strategies children need to use when doing research on the Web.
- Discusses issues such as filtering, privacy, and commercialization.

ment by stressing the benefits of parent involvement: When families are actively involved in schools, teachers learn more about the students in their class, and students are more able and willing to learn (NAESP, 2001).

Creating stronger ties with families is accomplished by keeping parents informed about their children's progress and what they are learning, explaining how they can help children budget their time for homework assignments, and describing ways they can assist them with their school work.

Involved families can effectively advocate for schools with the general public. In fact, informed parents are among the best ambassadors when it comes time for the community to vote on bond issues (NAESP, 2001). Only 24 percent of adults in the average community have children enrolled in community schools. Obviously, the support and positive votes of an entire community are critical to the passage of operating levies and school bond campaigns (Lyons, 2001).

HOW CAN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FACILITATE STUDENT SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT?

Inviting parents, members of the business community, and service organizations to identify academic goals and standards and quantify measures of progress "sends the message that what students learn and how well they learn it isn't an issue just for teachers and administrators but is a real priority for the community as well" (Wright & Saks, 2000).

Five methods that help school boards and administrators engage the public are: focus groups, telephone polling, public meetings, e-mail and study circles (Resnick, 2000).

Focus groups, which bring together a diverse group of 10 to 15 people to discuss a specific topic, can help school systems understand what issues they are facing. School officials can learn about hot issues that might derail a large public meeting. Focus groups also pinpoint key issues that will establish agendas for larger public forums.

Polling services are a relatively inexpensive way to engage the public. Although polling renders more superficial input than focus groups, it can give the school district an overview of the public's thinking. One advantage of poll questions is that they can

be incorporated into the public-engagement process at any time. In the beginning they can be used to monitor public sentiment on education reform issues, and later, to gauge public understanding of and support for new curriculum development.

Public meetings provide an opportunity for diverse groups to talk about critical issues. These forums also give districts and the general public a chance to understand

opposing sides of an issue, which can help to build consensus and create a sense of participatory government.

E-mail is a powerful, low-cost tool that can be used to connect school personnel with parents, business people and other audiences. E-mail responses on issues cannot be considered a representative sample of opinions, but they are a convenient way to communicate with diverse audiences.

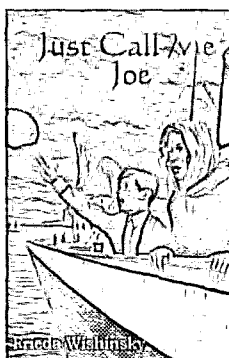
New Young Readers from Orca

Judaica



Hero
martha attema
In the last cold winter of WWII, a young Jewish boy risks everything.

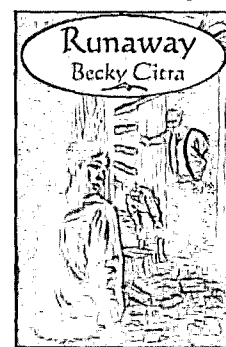
1-55143-251-X
U.S \$4.99 • CAN \$7.95



1-55143-249-8
U.S \$4.99 • CAN \$7.95

Just Call Me Joe
Frieda Wishinsky
As a Jewish immigrant to New York City, Joseph struggles to remain true to himself.

History



Runaway
Becky Citra
Max must face his first moral dilemma.

1-55143-276-5
U.S \$4.99 • CAN \$7.95

Mother Goose



1-55143-278-1
U.S \$4.99 • CAN \$7.95

Things are Looking Up Jack
Dan Bar-el
All is not right in the world of Mother Goose.

Teachers' guides are available for many
Orca Young Readers at www.orcabook.com



Orca Book Publishers 800-210-5277

Study circles are a semi-structured, multi-step method that convenes policy-makers and the public over extended periods in small-group discussions. More than 200 communities have used this method in the last decade to resolve issues ranging from education reform to racism. Policymakers say study circles give them the opportunity to understand a variety of perspectives about key issues and to receive a reality check on their policy direction (Rouk, 2000).

HOW CAN SCHOOLS MAINTAIN THE LONG-TERM SUPPORT OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS?

Leadership teams comprised of key stakeholders—teachers, parents, students and community members—can contribute continuity and stability to the public-engagement process. These teams should include people who have an institutional knowledge of the school district and who have access to top district leadership (Solomon & Ferguson, 1998).

Leadership teams monitor progress in reaching student goals and evaluate lessons learned from successes and failures. What differentiates this method from typical evaluation processes is that the teams do not wait until the end of the project but focus instead on continuous feedback.

To find out what's being said about their schools, districts might also seek out people

who are willing to organize into special cadres. Cadre members should look for "a thousand little things done well" that can be included in district marketing and communication materials (Carroll, 2001).

Board members and school leaders in one report made other recommendations for maintaining community support: Let the public know that district leadership is committed to public engagement; be clear about roles and responsibilities for maintaining communication; let the public know that their input makes a difference in outcomes; and keep all publics informed of the progress in strategic planning efforts (Wright & Saks, 2000).

REFERENCES

- Brown, L. (2001). Networking with the community. *School Business Affairs* 67 (5), 23-26. EJ629307.
- Carroll, D. (2001). Respecting the grapevine. *Principal Leadership* 2 (1), 21-23.
- Deily, M.E. (2001, March 28). Poll: Words, actions fail to match on public engagement. *Education Week* 20, 12.
- Gemberling, K., Smith, C., & Villani, J. (2000). *The key work of school boards: Guidebook*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.
- Lyons, J. (2001). Using data to market public schools. *School Business Affairs* 67 (5), 35-39. EJ629310.
- Meek, A. (1999). *Communicating with the community: A guide for school leaders*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2001). *Essentials for principals: Strengthening the connection between school and home*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals.
- Resnick, M. (2000). *Communities count: A school board guide to public engagement*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.
- Rouk, U. (2000). Policymakers build bridges to the public. *Insights on Education Policy, Practice and Research* 13, 1-12. ED451580.
- Solomon, M., & Ferguson, M. (1998). *How to build local support for comprehensive school reform*. Getting Better by Design Series, Vol. 7. Arlington, VA: New American Schools. ED450482.
- Wright, A. & Saks, J. (2000). The community connection: Case studies in public engagement. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.

**Cataloguing
Solutions**

Cataloguing Solutions *from the* Cataloguing Specialists

- Current Cataloguing, including Original Cataloguing
- French, Foreign Language and Non-Book Cataloguing
- Union Catalogue Creation and Maintenance
- Custom MARC Records for any Local System
- 100% Retrospective Conversion
- Cataloguing Products and Book Processing

Duncan Systems Specialists Inc.

281 Wyecroft Road, Oakville, Ontario, Canada L6K 2H2

Toll Free 1-800-836-5049 Ph: (905) 338-5545 Fax: (905) 338-1847 Web site: www.duncansystems.com

*Servicing libraries
worldwide
since 1990*



A vertical yellow bar with a red diamond at the top, located on the left side of the page.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Engaging the Community to Support Student Success
SOURCE: Teach Libr 31 no4 Ap 2004
WN: 0409406345005

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.teacherlibrarian.com/>

Copyright 1982-2004 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.